

CHAPTER XIV

DISTINCTNESS AND PRECISION OF UTTERANCE

In man speaks God.

—HESIOD, *Words and Days*.

And endless are the modes of speech, and far
Extends from side to side the field of words.

—HOMER, *Iliad*.

In popular usage the terms “pronunciation,” “enunciation,” and “articulation” are synonymous, but real pronunciation includes three distinct processes, and may therefore be defined as, *the utterance of a syllable or a group of syllables with regard to articulation, accentuation, and enunciation*.

Distinct and precise utterance is one of the most important considerations of public speech. How preposterous it is to hear a speaker making sounds of “inarticulate earnestness” under the contented delusion that he is telling something to his audience! Telling? Telling means communicating, and how can he actually communicate without making every word distinct?

Slovenly pronunciation results from either physical deformity or habit. A surgeon or a surgeon dentist may correct a deformity, but your own will, working by self-observation and resolution in drill, will break a habit. All depends upon whether you think it worth while.

Defective speech is so widespread that freedom from it is the exception. It is painfully common to hear public speakers mutilate the king’s English. If they do not actually murder it, as Curran once said, they often knock an *i* out.

A Canadian clergyman, writing in the *Homiletic Review*, relates that in his student days “a classmate who was an Englishman supplied a country church for a Sunday. On the following Monday he conducted a missionary meeting. In the course of his address he said some farmers thought they were doing their duty toward missions when they gave their ‘hods and hends’ to the work, but the Lord required more. At the close of the meeting a young woman seriously said to a friend: ‘I am sure the farmers do well if they give their hogs and hens to missions. It is more than most people can afford.’ ”

It is insufferable effrontery for any man to appear before an audience who persists in driving the *h* out of happiness, home and heaven, and, to paraphrase Waldo Messaros, will not let it rest in hell. He who does not show enough self-knowledge to see in himself such glaring faults, nor enough self-mastery to correct them, has no business to instruct others. If he *can* do no better, he should be silent. If he *will* do no better, he should also be silent.

Barring incurable physical defects—and few are incurable nowadays—the whole matter is one of will. The catalogue of those who have done the impossible by faithful work is as inspiring as a roll-call of warriors. The less there is of you,” says Nathan Sheppard, “the more need for you to make the most of what there is of you.”

Articulation

Articulation is the forming and joining of the elementary sounds of speech. It seems an appalling task to utter articulately the third-of-a million words that go to make up our English vocabulary, but the way to make a beginning is really simple: *learn to utter correctly, and with easy change from one to the other, each of the forty-four elementary sounds in our language.*

The reasons why articulation is so painfully slurred by a great many public speakers are four: ignorance of the elemental sounds; failure to discriminate between sounds nearly alike; a slovenly, lazy use of the vocal organs; and a torpid will. Anyone who is still master of himself will know how to handle each of these defects.

The vowel sounds are the most vexing source of errors, especially where diphthongs are found. Who has not heard such errors as are hit off in this inimitable verse by Oliver Wendell Holmes:

Learning condemns beyond the reach of hope
The careless lips that speak of sōap for sōap:
Her edict exiles from her fair abode
The clownish voice that utters rōad for rōad:
Less stern to him who calls his cōat, a cōat
And steers his bōat believing it a bōat.
She pardoned one, our classic city's boast.
Who said at Cambridge, mōst instead of mōst.
But knit her brows and stamped her angry foot
To hear a Teacher call a rōōt a rōōt.

The foregoing examples are all monosyllables, but bad articulation is frequently the result of joining sounds that do not belong together. For example, no one finds it difficult to say *beauty*, but many persist in pronouncing *duty* as though it were spelled either *dooty* or *juty*. It is not only from untaught speakers that we hear such slovenly articulations as *colyum* for *column*, and *pritty* for *pretty*, but even great orators occasionally offend quite as unblushingly as less noted mortals.

Nearly all such are errors of carelessness, not of pure ignorance—of carelessness because the ear never tries to hear what the lips articulate. It must be exasperating to a foreigner to find that the elemental sound *ou* gives him no hint for the pronunciation of *bough*, *cough*, *rough*, *thorough*, and *through*, and we can well forgive even a man of culture who occasionally loses his way amidst the intricacies of English articulation, but there can be no excuse for the slovenly utterance of the simple vowel

sounds which form at once the life and the beauty of our language. He who is too lazy to speak distinctly should hold his tongue.

The consonant sounds occasion serious trouble only for those who do not look with care at the spelling of words about to be pronounced. Nothing but carelessness can account for saying *Jacop*, *Babtist*, *sevem*, *alwus*, or *sadisfy*.

“He that hath yaws to yaw, let him yaw,” is the rendering which an Anglophobic clergyman gave of the familiar scripture, “He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.” After hearing the name of Sir Humphry Davy pronounced, a Frenchman who wished to write to the eminent Englishman thus addressed the letter: “Serum Fridavi.”

Accentuation

Accentuation is the stressing of the proper syllables in words. This it is that is popularly called *pronunciation*. For instance, we properly say that a word is mispronounced when it is accented *in'-vite* instead of *in-vite'*, though it is really an offense against only one form of pronunciation—accentuation.

It is the work of a lifetime to learn the accents of a large vocabulary and to keep pace with changing usage; but an alert ear, the study of word-origins, and the dictionary habit, will prove to be mighty helpers in a task that can never be finally completed.

Enunciation

Correct enunciation is the complete utterance of all the sounds of a syllable or a word. Wrong articulation gives the wrong sound to the vowel or vowels of a word or a syllable, as *doo* for *dew*; or unites two sounds improperly, as *hully* for *wholly*. Wrong enunciation is the *incomplete* utterance of a syllable or a word, the sound omitted or added being usually

consonantal. To say *needcessity* instead of *necessity* is a wrong articulation; to say *doin* for *doing* is improper enunciation. The one articulates—that is, joints—two sounds that should not be joined, and thus gives the word a positively wrong sound; the other fails to touch all the sounds in the word, and *in that particular way* also sounds the word incorrectly.

“My tex’ may be foun’ in the fif’ and six’ verses of the secon’ chapter of Titus; and the subjec’ of my discourse is ‘The Gover’ment of ar Homes.’”¹

What did this preacher do with his final consonants? This slovenly dropping of essential sounds is as offensive as the common habit of running words together so that they lose their individuality and distinctness. *Lighten dark, uppen down, doncher know, partic’lar, zamination*, are all too common to need comment.

Imperfect enunciation is due to lack of attention and to lazy lips. It can be corrected by resolutely attending to the formation of syllables as they are uttered. Flexible lips will enunciate difficult combinations of sounds without slighting any of them, but such flexibility cannot be attained except by habitually uttering words with distinctness and accuracy. A daily exercise in enunciating a series of sounds will in a short time give flexibility to the lips and alertness to the mind, so that no word will be uttered without receiving its due complement of sound.

Returning to our definition, we see that when the sounds of a word are properly articulated, the right syllables accented, and full value given to each sound in its enunciation, we have correct pronunciation. Perhaps one word of caution is needed here, lest any one, anxious to bring out clearly every sound, should overdo the matter and neglect the unity and smoothness of pronunciation. Be careful not to bring syllables into so much prominence as to make words seem long and angular. The joints must be kept decently dressed.

Before delivery, do not fail to go over your manuscript and note every sound that may possibly be mispronounced. Consult the dictionary and make assurance doubly sure. If the arrangement of words is unfavorable to clear enunciation, change either words or order, and do not rest until you can follow Hamlet's directions to the players.

QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

1. Practise repeating the following rapidly, paying particular attention to the consonants.

"Foolish Flavius, flushing feverishly, fiercely found fault with Flora's frivolity.¹"

Mary's matchless mimicry makes much mischief.

Seated on shining shale she sells sea shells.

You youngsters yielded your youthful yule-tide yearnings yesterday.

2. Sound the *l* in each of the following words, repeated in sequence:

Blue black blinkers blocked Black Blondin's eyes.

3. Do you say a *bloo* sky or a *blue* sky?

4. Compare the *u* sound in *few* and in *new*. Say each aloud, and decide which is correct, *Noo York*, *New Yawk*, or *New York*?

5. Pay careful heed to the directions of this chapter in reading the following, from Hamlet. After the interview with the ghost of his father, Hamlet tells his friends Horatio and Marcellus that he intends to act a part:

Horatio. O day and night, but this is wondrous strange!

Hamlet. And therefore as a stranger give it welcome.

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,

Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.

But come;

Here, as before, never, so help you mercy,

How strange or odd so'er I bear myself,—

As I perchance hereafter shall think meet

To put an antic disposition on,—

That you, at such times seeing me, never shall,

With arms encumber'd thus, or this head-shake,
Or by pronouncing of some doubtful phrase,
As "Well, well, we know," or "We could, an if we would,"
Or "If we list to speak," or "There be, an if there might,"
Or such ambiguous giving-out, to note
That you know aught of me: this not to do,
So grace and mercy at your most need help you,
Swear.

—Act I. Scene V.

6. Make a list of common errors of pronunciation, saying which are due to faulty articulation, wrong accentuation, and incomplete enunciation. In each case make the correction.

7. Criticise any speech you may have heard which displayed these faults.

8. Explain how the false shame of seeming to be too precise may hinder us from cultivating perfect verbal utterance.

9. Over-precision is likewise a fault. To bring out any syllable unduly is to caricature the word. Be *moderate* in reading the following:

THE LAST SPEECH OF MAXIMILIAN DE ROBESPIERRE

The enemies of the Republic call me tyrant! Were I such they would grovel at my feet. I should gorge them with gold, I should grant them immunity for their crimes, and they would be grateful. Were I such, the kings we have vanquished, far from denouncing Robespierre, would lend me their guilty support; there would be a covenant between them and me. Tyranny must have tools. But the enemies of tyranny,—whither does their path tend? To the tomb, and to immortality! What tyrant is my protector? To what faction do I belong? Yourselves! What faction, since the beginning of the Revolution, has crushed and annihilated so many detected traitors? You, the people,—our principles—are that faction—a faction to which I am devoted, and against which all the scoundrelism of the day is banded!

The confirmation of the Republic has been my object; and I know that the Republic can be established only on the eternal basis of morality. Against me, and against those who hold kindred principles, the league is formed. My life? Oh! my life I abandon without a regret! I have seen the past; and I foresee the future. What friend of this country would wish to survive the moment when he could no longer serve it,—when he could no longer defend innocence against oppression? Wherefore should I continue in an order of things, where intrigue eternally triumphs over truth; where justice is mocked; where passions the most abject, or fears the most absurd, over-ride the sacred interests of humanity? In witnessing the multitude of vices which the torrent of the Revolution has rolled in turbid communion with its civic virtues, I confess that I have sometimes feared that I should be sullied, in the eyes of posterity, by the impure neighborhood of unprincipled men, who had thrust themselves into association with the sincere friends of humanity; and I rejoice that these conspirators against my country have now, by their reckless rage, traced deep the line of demarcation between themselves and all true men.

Question history, and learn how all the defenders of liberty, in all times, have been overwhelmed by calumny. But their traducers died also. The good and the bad disappear alike from the earth; but in very different conditions. O Frenchmen! O my countrymen! Let not your enemies, with their desolating doctrines, degrade your souls, and enervate your virtues! No, Chaumette, no! Death is not “an eternal sleep!” Citizens! efface from the tomb that motto, graven by sacrilegious hands, which spreads over all nature a funereal crape, takes from oppressed innocence its support, and affronts the beneficent dispensation of death! Inscribe rather thereon these words: “Death is the commencement of immortality!” I leave to the oppressors of the People a terrible testament, which I proclaim with the independence befitting one whose career is so nearly ended; it is the awful truth—“Thou shalt die!”

¹ *School and College Speaker*, Mitchell.

¹ *School and College Speaker*. Mitchell.